

The Bell that Caused the Bang

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As the leaves begin to fall off of the trees and cold gusts sneak into the air, there are other events that signify fall has come to America. Millions of children return to school, baseball crowns a new world champion, and a select group of young men will bleed, sweat, and cry.

The latter event, of course, describes the all-american tradition of high school football. Every Friday or Saturday night, beginning in late August, 60 young men will carry the hopes of their local community. No matter what is wrong in the world, for about two hours, the youth of America fight for pride. During that time, every disaster, tragedy and wrong committed is put aside.

At least that is how it is in southern Illinois. Hundreds pack each high school stadium with the words of Vince Lombard ringing in their minds, "Winning isn't the most important thing; it's the only thing." Unfortunately, this good-natured game can sometimes turn from a competition for pride, into something much more sinister and violent, as it did on one fall day in 1969.

The Cubs and the Cardinals; the Bears and the Packers; and at the high school level there was the rivalry between the Belleville Township High School West Maroons and the East Saint Louis Flyers, especially in football. The annual Thanksgiving Day battle between the Maroons and the Flyers began in 1914. It was decided that there should be some kind of victory prize, to be given to the winning town as bragging rights until the next match-up.

For 54 years, the Flyers and the Maroons met, alternating stadiums each year, to compete for a brass bell, donated by Southern Railways. The Victory Bell, as it would come to be known,

went to whichever team won the game and during the game, it would sit on the outskirts of one of the end zones, as allusive as the Golden Fleece, the Holy Grail of southern illinois football.

On November 28, 1969, the stage was set for the fiftieth annual meeting between the Maroons and the Flyers. The game was to be played at East Saint Louis' Parsons Field. Temperatures were at a record low, but that didn't stop nearly 7,000 fans from packing Parsons Field on that Thanksgiving morning. Seven thousand fans may seem like a relatively large crowd for a high school football game but this was normally the size of the crowd that attended the annual Thanksgiving Day game.

Much was at stake. If the bell did not represent pride, honor, or dignity to either high school, then nothing did. Since this game was the last of the season, on several occasions the winner of this game was crowned the Southwestern Conference football champion, to which both teams belonged. Belleville West had lost to the Flyers for the past five years, and with two minutes left in the game, the chances of bringing the bell back to Belleville in 1969 did not look very good - the score was 12-6 in favor of the Flyers.

As former Maroon football player John Bunch remembers, "The East Saint Louis center hiked the ball over the quarterback's head. We recovered (the ball) and drove toward the end zone. With about 12 seconds left, the Maroons scored and won the game 13-12."

Unlike previous years, the Victory Bell, instead of being located at one end zone, was located in front of a grandstand. As Maroon players and fans began to realize that the bell was going back to Belleville, a mass exodus began towards that grandstand.

"You have to understand, this wasn't, 'hey, we won,' this was, 'we have to get to the bell,' that's how much the bell meant to us," former Maroon football player Thomas Baltz said.

Unfortunately for the Maroons, the grandstand was also located on the East Saint Louis side of

the field. While Bellevillians rushed to grab the bell, some East Saint Louis fans tried just as hard to keep it.

Some Belleville West players, such as Baltz, decided that it was not worth risking injury to get the bell. After all, it would be exchanged formally at a later date. However, there were some players that made their way to the bell. When East Saint Louis fans began tossing beer bottles, sticks, and even a trash can at the Maroons, Maroon fans decided to take action.

That is when the struggle began between Maroon and Flyer fans. While this article does not attempt to prove which side was wrong in its actions, the fact of the matter is that a fight did break out that day. While most of the violence was contained in several small fist-fights, East Saint Louis police were worried that more violence might erupt.

As Bunch recalls, "An East Saint Louis police officer was in the middle of the crowd. He was off duty and wearing a trench coat, so no one knew who he was. He fired two warning shots into the air, and the crowd quickly dispersed."

"We actually have the footage on our game tapes. Looking back now, it's quite eerie to see the shots being fired and to realize that we were a part of that," Baltz said.

In the end, no fans were hospitalized. However, two East Saint Louis youths were taken into custody, and Maroons' star Tom Stock suffered an injured hand in the fight. Amazingly enough Stock would go on to win the state championship in the shot put in the spring of 1970. Although a fight over a bell may seem simplistic. Bunch says that it was important in the culture of Illinois' sports. By the late 1960s, East Saint Louis was predominantly African American, while Belleville's population consisted of few African Americans.

"It was a sign of the times. This was the 1960s. There was plenty of racial tension, and it obviously carried into the game. The "Bell" was the sign of pride. It made one city feel better

than the other. The guys in East Saint Louis thought the Belleville boys were rich, and winning it meant everything to them, just as it did to us."

However, the adventure was not complete. As the Maroons rushed to get on the team bus, several Flyers fans snuck off with the bell. It was not until a few weeks later, when the bell was found in an East Saint Louis garage, that it was returned to its rightful owners.

If anything, this incident showed what can occur when pride is on the line, especially when other tensions are present. The annual game between the Flyers and the Maroons is no longer played on Thanksgiving Day, having stopped in 1974, due to the beginning of the state football playoffs. Nowadays, whenever the two teams play, the bell is no longer brought to the game, but rather exchanged at a later date. Today, the game does not have the same meaning. It does not bring an entire town together, rallying around a group of young men for the pride of the city. When the Flyers and the Maroons meet today, there certainly are not 7,000 strong at the game - only a few hundred. While the rivalry and the spirit of the game is now gone, the effects of the tradition will forever shape these two communities.

The next time you find yourself at a chilly high school football game, remember that more is at stake than a win-loss record - as two teams from two sides of opposite sides of the spectrum demonstrated so many years ago. [From Belleville Township High School West Yearbook, Bellevinois 1970; student historian's interview with Thomas Baltz, Jan. 15, 2004; student historian's interview with John Bunch, Jan. 15, 2004; Belleville News-Democrat, Nov. 29, 1969.]